

Recollections of Zimbabwe in the 1960s

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From January 1959 to January 1967, I lived in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). Before we left England, I was told our family was going to live in a multiracial country in Africa, part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.¹ Very quickly I learned that other countries throughout the region, including South Africa, were pretty much the same, apart from the slightly eccentric Botswana (Bechuanaland): in them all Africans were poor and subhuman. Even those less poor than others were still subhuman.

Learning racism

On arrival in Rhodesia at the age of ten, my conditioning into racial segregation and racism went smoothly. Only white people, apart from servants in shacks, lived in the beautiful suburbs of Salisbury, and only Africans lived in the townships: the two names I knew were Highfield² and Harare³. It was unimaginable that a young white girl should go there: it was more than just illegal. I didn't want to, anyway, because of the bad-smelling bodies, dirt, ragged clothes with no colour left, bad-tasting food, no real streets, darkness and one black cooking pot inside shacks, no beds or chairs, no water, no oven. Nothing had a symmetrical shape or polished

surface. When Africans of the same sex shook hands, their hands kept touching too long. Hardly any of them wore shoes. Their music wasn't played on proper instruments but on thin small penny whistles or little wooden blocks fixed up with strips of metal which the player held in his palm, twanging randomly, on and on. This was how Africans necessarily were. They weren't intelligent enough to be otherwise. A white person couldn't possibly have these attributes, especially the smell and eating nothing but *sadza* (Shona for maize porridge).

White terror

Early in 1960, I was sitting in a quince tree in our garden in what's still a mostly white, entirely wealthy, suburb of Harare. I was going over in my mind what I'd heard about the Congo and Kenya, thrilled by the horror. Belgian nuns in the Congo were getting massacred, the survivors fleeing south to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). I imagined severed heads and limbs, black robes fluttering. Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN peacekeeping envoy to the Congo, had died in a plane crash.⁴ There was war in Katanga, in which Africans were butchering each other as well as any white people around, including

male missionaries. These events were the result of the Belgian colonists' incompetence.⁵ At the same time, there was Kenya. A girl at school⁶ who used to live in Kenya whispered after dark that the hairs on Kenyatta's elephant tail whisk carried poison and witchcraft: "It drives them all mad, Mau Mau. They creep around at night in dirty animal skins murdering people and they get in through bedroom windows as well." All white people had metal bars over their ground-floor windows. Most windows were ground-floor because their houses were spread along the ground rather than piled one storey on top of another.⁷

White liberals

There were, however, brave African nationalists in Rhodesia: Ndabaningi Sithole, Nkomo, Samkange and Chinamano, names I associated with Gonakanzingwa,⁸ a prison camp in the south of the country surrounded by barbed wire and without shady trees. As far as I knew, I'd never seen these men; there was no TV. White liberals like my parents, true blue Tories in their native environment and believers in the British method of neocolonisation, talked to Africans other than their servants and workers. Every so often African couples whose names I didn't take in came to dinner at our house, embarrassing partly because their clothes appeared to creak with their own embarrassment, and what did the servants (only African) think?⁹ My (only white) friends' parents didn't behave in this way. We children were forbidden to call Africans "munts",¹⁰ a term of casual abuse — as in, "A couple of munts just walked past our gate," or "Hey you munt, pick up my napkin," — and I made sure I didn't speak with a Rhodesian accent, rooted via South Africa in Afrikaans. I also heard about the multiracial Capricorn Club,¹¹ which was next door to the National Gallery, a swathe of swinging London architecture in town. Here the

multiracial society was discussed amongst members, including Garfield Todd.¹² To no avail. In 1962, the Rhodesian Front came to power, beating the just about multi-racial United Federal Party.¹³ Rhodesian Front people were more likely to be Afrikaners, that is, stupid and inelegant, or at least with Afrikaners' impolite attitude to Africans. They were against majority rule and therefore bad. In this way I was early on impressed with the necessity of taking up moral positions.¹⁴

Collapse of British control

Roy Welensky, the UFP prime minister of the Federation, was fat in a loose spilling-over European¹⁵ kind of way, as opposed to the tight bulging African way, and an ex-railway worker, besides which his name showed he wasn't really British. These things accounted for his poor showing. Godfrey Huggins, UFP prime minister of Southern Rhodesia until 1953, and to a lesser extent Edgar Whitehead,¹⁶ were a different kettle of fish altogether, but now out of the picture. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland¹⁷ ended in 1963.

On the one hand, in northern Rhodesia, where the copper mines were, and in Nyasaland, Kaunda and Dr Hastings Banda were getting dangerously above themselves, the latter probably not a doctor at all because most Africans didn't understand the intricacies of titles and qualifications and were likely to cheat. Besides, witch doctors and superstition had to be combated. Further away, Nyerere, another communist, and Kenyatta, yet another communist as well as enflamer of primitive instincts, were doing just what Africans didn't do: acting independently of Europeans. Then in far-away Ghana, in a darker more tropical part of Africa, there was the hardly nameable because so appalling Nkrumah,¹⁸ a communist of the most virulent variety, and, equally

outside the natural order of things, a Pan-Africanist.

The names of these men hung over most white conversations like a *banga* (Shona for knife). Bouganvillea and passion flowers climbed the columns of a verandah where a director of a tobacco company plus wife, a mining company official or two plus wives, a district commissioner plus wife, drank their sundowners (cocktails). Those columns, which only two generations of African servants had been instructed to treat and retreat with pollutants against white ants' jaws and hornets' spit, were exposed: wooden, vulnerable to fire,¹⁹ to the slash of a *banga*. But the uniforms²⁰ of the British South Africa Police somewhere beyond the high garden hedge were like shiny beige armour and their leather gun belts and knee boots glittered. I was frightened of the BSAP. A white officer had once bent over me in town and told me to get off the road and onto the pavement or else.

On the other hand there were also Ian Smith with his strong Rhodesian accent and funny eye which never made a convincing war wound, Denis Lardner-Burke the minister of justice, the terrible Law and Order Maintenance Act which became worse under the Rhodesian Front, and talk of a unilateral declaration of independence from Britain.

Life and racism as usual

At the time of the November 1964 referendum, when the majority of white people voted for UDI, I was about to be locked up as a boarder at school. My father gave up his white Salisbury medical practice for the bush, even though he'd been able to run a clinic in Harare (township) and stand as a medical witness in court against police torture. We went to live on an Anglican medical mission. Now I often passed women on the path leading by the church and the

hospital to Ngomo, a mountain of granite boulders scored with black shadows. They weren't servants, they didn't give way to me, and they didn't look me in the eye although they always offered greetings. I walked on by huts with ragged grass roofs and black holes for doors, a few charred sticks outside for ovens. For some time, Jesus had seemed a bit off colour when he'd said, "Unto every one that hath shall be given", which I couldn't work out if he meant description or prescription. Nonetheless I passed a lot of time at school on my knees in front of the communion altar, not out of guilt but to escape. That Africans should have to pay for education when white people got it free was clearly bad, as was the state of *pikininis*²¹ running noses crawling with flies, their little stomachs bulging and their hair thin and orange because of kwashiorkor (starvation). As well as the absolute segregation, the racism and inverted prurience of most teachers and girls at school I imbibed every day — African women had large bottoms so they could carry their babies on their backs, Othello (my A level text) wasn't black and didn't have sex with Desdemona, African women were girls and men were boys, chiefs lolling around in the circle of dust between their huts fattened up their many wives on elephants' milk, the mealie-growing Shona people were too nice to cause trouble, unlike the Ndebele, who were related to the Zulus — came up against the height and barrier of the black servant/white settler relationship. When I went to the door of the school kitchen to beg for some cheese because I'd been starving myself over my A level texts, the man who was called the head kitchen boy looked down over his white uniform in silence, his bare feet underneath, and in his eyes was what? Hatred? Irony? Compassion? Calculation?

UDI

On 11 November 1965, classes stopped and the deputy headmistress summoned the school into the gym. She was bow legged, the geography teacher, known to be strict, and an Ian Smith sympathiser. He had, she said, declared UDI. There would be sanctions, but we must be resilient. The headmistress, an Ian Smith despiser like me and fan of early romantic Wordsworth without letting on who Toussaint L'Ouverture was, was nowhere to be seen. I went to listen to the radio in my sixth-form bedroom. Harold Wilson, the British prime minister, was on, talking about sanctions and not sending British troops against the "rebels". Smith then came on talking about kith and kin²² and having been a Battle of Britain Royal Airforce pilot in the Second World War. He had already declared a state of emergency, which touched white people not at all. During the next eighteen months, negotiations, including the HMS Tiger talks, showed clearly the British government weren't going to do anything.

As far as I was concerned, there were now three questions — would the British examining board mark my A level papers, would the neither brown nor white sanctions-busting sugar taste alright, and would Chief Tangwena win the fight against his people's eviction off their land? The first question was quickly resolved: yes. So Smith and the British government weren't such enemies after all. The second question was part of living on the mission, where my mother and her servant Samuel boiled our drinking water and milk, we shared the bath water between three and then siphoned it out of the window onto the garden, the small pink juicy bananas — "ladies' fingers" by name, white ladies — came from the trees by the kitchen door, the telephone was on a party line, the roof of our house was corrugated iron and beloved of geckoes and hornets, the walls were

asymmetrical, the lights went out at eight in the evening, no other white teenagers lived nearby, and the student nurses were an African crowd who sang songs and drank drinks I couldn't possibly enjoy, let alone take to. In other words, sanctions were a joke, and manufacturing — food processing, clothes, household goods like matches and soap — flourished. Rhodesian corn flakes were only slightly more leathery than Kellogs. Oil, money, agricultural and industrial plant, came from the US, West Germany and, extraordinarily, Britain, all via South Africa. Tobacco, which everyone except my parents smoked, was stockpiled. But I knew that underneath the enthusiastic sanctions busting, ostensibly in defiance of the British government, was the shoring up of defences against the actual threat — Africans.

The third question wasn't answered before I left for England. The BSAP were trying to evict Chief Rekayi Tangwena and his people off the hills and valleys in Manyikaland (*nyika*, Shona for country, land, the world) near where we lived. They were to be deported to a barren mountain behind mile upon mile of barbed wire where no-one else went.²³ This was connected to the way the BSAP and the Rhodesian army now strolled around everywhere, obviously in charge, and to the gun-toting fear of most white people. Tangwena²⁴ must be a brave man, since the Africans I saw in the countryside were thin, and what would they fight the BSAP and the army with? Their *badzas*? (*Badza*, Shona for hoe, plural *mapadza*.) I did, however, sense the anger inside the doors of the huts, in the chests of the women on the path, of the man who gave me food. But underneath these questions lay another: were Africans clever enough to beat these Europeans? In January 1967, I left.

My experience, which began in Zimbabwe, of

Africans as implacable fighters against the system has accompanied cleaning out the question's racist presupposition. I therefore want to be on Africans' side, on the continent and in the diaspora, but have never been able to trust organisations created by white progressives to fight racism, drop the debt, start from the bottom up or make international links. Despite the illusion of national independence as long as neo-colonialism exists, nothing can persuade me, not even Mugabe calling in the IMF in 1983, that the struggle which preceded 1980 and political

independence from the white settler regime weren't gains for the movement against imperialism and for Pan-African liberation. Perhaps my knowledge that any human being can change, like I did, makes me more optimistic than reality warrants. So an appropriate answer to that last question has been to take on political work, as far as I'm able and required, in an organisation led by Africans and shaped by the struggle against neo-colonialism, while the world remains as racist, racialised and soaked in injustice as Zimbabwe ever has been.

NOTES

1. The Southern Rhodesian white regime had been “self-governing” and independent from Britain in all but name since 1923.
2. Highfield was a particular target of police and military attack. Its history of political resistance continues today.
3. As if in 1994 Johannesburg had been renamed Soweto. Pass laws, the Land Apportionment Act, and the Native Accommodation and Registration Act all imprisoned Africans within the most infertile and unhealthy areas, both rural and urban, of their own land. As in South Africa at the time, there were “indecent” laws, except that in Rhodesia the white (male) regime had in 1906 legislated only against sex between black men and white women, imprisonment for the former, hard labour for the latter. Hence, rape of black women by white men was legitimised, but rape of white women by black men was punishable by hanging. White women could always cry rape if their male black servants refused them sex, or if they were charged with sex with a black man.
4. No-one mentioned Lumumba.
5. The Portuguese colonists were completely beyond the pale. You only had to drive over the border near Umtali (Mutare) for your prawns in piri piri sauce in a Vila Pery (Chimoio) restaurant to see how inefficient and generally slummy Mozambique was. That is, rural poverty was visible at the roadside, not shoved away behind white people's gardens and farms. The settler regime in Zimbabwe had also enforced a relatively high degree of industrialisation on the people, as well as the theft of their land.
6. All white girls except for the two Patels and Jackie Khama, the coloured (mixed race) daughter of the scandalous marriage between Seretse Khama, king of Bechuanaland, and an English woman.
7. They had as much land as they could steal, both in cities and farming areas.
8. After 1964 there were two major prison camps: Gonakandzingwa in the south east for ZAPU leaders, including Nkomo, and Sikombela in the north for ZANU, including Mugabe. Other leaders, such as Chikerama and Chitepo, went into exile, the latter to direct ZANU's armed struggle.
9. The use of servants by the elite didn't end at independence. They still live in shacks at the bottom of beautiful suburban gardens, banana groves screening their ugliness from bedroom window view.
10. Derived from *munhu*, with the *u* pronounced as in “put”, the Shona word for person, human being.
11. The Capricorn Club was founded in the 1955 by a white man who left Kenya at the prospect of independence. African members, whom I didn't hear about, included Takawira and Chikerama. In the 1962 uprising after Edgar Whitehead banned ZAPU, militants attacked African policemen as sellouts. They called them “Thsombes” after the western-backed secessionist in Katanga, and “Capricorns” after the African members of the Capricorn Club.
12. Prime minister of Southern Rhodesia from 1953 to 1958, and then leader of the liberal Central African Party. Garfield Todd (one of less than a quarter of a million white people) had in 1956 authorised troops to tear gas a peaceful African meeting. A year later the ANC

was formed, led by Nkomo. By 1962 a couple of thousand Africans out of 4 million (now 11 million), were enfranchised on the basis of property.

13. Known as the "establishment" amongst white people. The following year Ian Smith deposed Winston Field — not tough enough against the British government — to become prime minister on a "no majority rule in my life time" ticket. I didn't know about the many African organisations — the African Teachers' Association, the City Youth League, the ANC, the National Democratic Party, the Zimbabwe National Party, the Pan-African Socialist Union — which successive governments banned and militants then revived, with the emergence of ZAPU in 1961 and ZANU in 1963. All African parties were banned by the RF in 1964 and leading figures like Edson Sithole, Mugabe and Nkomo started ten years of detention.
14. Moral positions which had little to do with the realities of who was dehumanising and exploiting who. Liberals tend to assume their arguments will have to convince no-one more sophisticated than a child. There is also in the European tradition an assumption that children can't understand the world: they're therefore kept in ignorance.
15. White people of British as opposed to Afrikaner descent used the term "European" to refer to themselves.
16. Godfrey Huggins, prime minister before Garfield Todd, was the main proponent of Rhodesia's version of apartheid. He advocated the parallel development of the races and referred to the African as the horse and the European as the rider. Edgar Whitehead, prime minister from 1958, failed to do British imperialism's job for it. He initiated the notorious Law and Order Maintenance Act after the 1960 uprising in the townships, authorised successive states of emergency in which in that year eleven people were killed, banned African organisations, notably the ANC in 1959, and detained African leaders. He also reinstated the 1906 "indecent" law (see footnote 3). He then lost the 1962 election on a manifesto of ending racial segregation of public swimming pools and majority rule in 15 years' time.
17. The white regime in Southern Rhodesia dominated it and took the profits from the Copper Belt. The smaller white populations in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland had agreed to the Federation in 1953 in the hope that independence would be staged off.
18. In 1963, at the collapse of the Federation, Nkrumah at the UN tried to block the transfer of the British-controlled Federal armed forces to the Rhodesian Front government, arguing presciently that the white minority might one day use them against independent African states. The British government vetoed the Ghanaian resolution. It is doubtful a Labour government would have done otherwise.
19. From August 1962, especially against white farmers, arson increased. In July 1962, the ZAPU leadership had decided to go underground and send young men out of the country to train in sabotage. In September 1962, Whitehead banned ZAPU.
20. The BSAP wore shorts, as did and do many white men. This seems to be based on a belief in the beauty of the European male calf. Cecil Rhodes's invasion of the land now known as Zimbabwe was based in the British Cape Colony, hence the name of the police force.
21. The word for children in the pidgin Shona — "Kitchen Kaffir" (sic) — spoken by some white people, mainly farmers and

their wives and children (who weren't *pikininis*).

22. I spent some time in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and found the majority of Protestants' views of Catholics and the British government almost identical to most Rhodesians' views of Africans and the British government. The militarisation of the country was also sickeningly familiar.
23. Tangwena's ancestors had come to an "understanding" with the original white invaders. In 1966 another white man decided he wanted the land. Tangwena fought in the courts initially. The following quotes about land crimes in Zimbabwe are from a white ex-district commissioner's report of 1959. "In most Reserves men with six or eight acres of sand soil can see with their own eyes across their own Reserve boundary-line thousands of acres of European farmland, mostly underdeveloped and often virtually unused. Very often the soil is better than that of the Reserve, and sometimes the change in soil-type coincides exactly with the boundary. Most European farms consist of thousands of acres." ... "The fact is indisputable, that when, before the advent of the Europeans, Africans had abundant land, the erosion they caused was negligible, and the soil maintained its fertility and structure. It is the coming of

the Europeans which has changed this and caused most of the soil erosion and soil exhaustion in the Reserves; there have been three stages, (i) by the Land Apportionment Act which limits the land of the African population, (ii) by the huge increase in the African population [under 500,000 at the end of the 19C], an increase which would not have occurred had there been no European occupation, and (iii) by the continuous cultivation policy which for nearly a generation has been encouraged by the Native Agriculture Department ..." ... "Spokesmen of the Southern Rhodesian government will readily admit that one aim of the Land Husbandry Act is to force "loafers" either to farm properly in the Reserve, or to go and work in European industry and agriculture, and also to stop the present practice of Africans alternating for different periods between town and country, between work and 'loafing in the Reserves.'" (Windrich, E. (1975) *The Rhodesian Problem*.) Nearly all the factual material in my footnotes comes from the CLR James Collection in the CLR James Library, Hackney Council, London. This library is to be closed down (2002) as a result of the racist neoliberal policies of the British government.

24. Tangwena is honoured as a hero killed in the Second Chimurenga.